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# THE HIGH SCHOOL JOURNAL

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## THE HIGH SCHOOL RECITATION

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### PART I.

WHETHER wisely or not the development and growth of our public school system, attendant upon the necessity for meeting an ever-increasing number of political, industrial, social and economic situations, has made necessary the instruction as well as the discipline of children in groups or classes of varying sizes. It is interesting to note that while the aim of primitive education was to preserve an entity within the group and was primarily for group welfare, yet the instruction was given to individuals and not to groups. With the increasing emphasis laid by civilization upon the sacredness of the individual there grew up a method of instruction by groups, and only in very recent times has there come about any concerted attempt to study and meet individual needs by various devices looking toward individual or small group instruction.

But such is the condition at present that teachers must give instruction to pupils in classes varying as to numbers of pupils from a very few to a class so large as to be most unweildly and cumbersome. The school recitation is concerned chiefly with the methods of instructing and testing pupils in class groups. While class discipline is a part of the problem which centers around the recitation, yet, as generally conceived, it is a small part, and the major portion of the emphasis is placed on the instruction phase.

#### THE FUNCTIONS OF THE RECITATION

What, then, may one say is the function of the recitation, what is its purpose, its place in our system of educational procedure? In the light of modern pedagogical studies we must consider that, in a most general sense, one very important function of the recitation is to assist the pupils of the class in rounding out their life. This would be delightfully vague and indefinite if it were not clear and exact in its application.

In the elementary school, for example, the pupil is making an acquaintance with the tools of knowledge and acquiring a minimum of skill in their uses. These tools are a most necessary part of the equipment with which the pupil is to shape his whole life. Without

such knowledge a part of this life fails to develop, and therefore the class recitation becomes a necessary means whereby one phase of the pupil's intellectual life may be rounded out.

Again, the pupils must live and work in a community, in a group. All the members of the class in school have both rights and privileges which all the others are in duty bound to respect. Some pupils will progress faster than others and some will receive special rewards and others will not. All kinds of life situations may and actually do arise in class recitations to which pupils must react. Here is the chance to be utilized in enlarging the social side of their life and developing it.

Certain work must be done and that with accuracy and speed not to say faithfully and cheerfully. Certain modes of action must be conformed to and certain rules must be made the spring of certain actions. Absence or tardiness, failure to perform assigned work outside of class, etc., present situations involving an opportunity to assist society in its task of making every individual as fully complete as that individual is potentially able to become.

Further illustrations are not necessary to show how the class recitation presents potential situations for assisting pupils toward all-round and complete development. That so many teachers fail to recognize this fact and that so many more who recognize it fail to utilize the opportunity is a sad commentary upon the blasé attitude so common among members of our profession. Every class recitation is not only a single human situation but is fairly teeming with all sorts of life situations in matters social, intellectual, emotional, physical, aesthetic, volitional, and what-not. Neither are these situations in themselves artificial, nor need they be made so; they are life in miniature and in different setting but *they are life* nevertheless. One function of the recitation is surely to assist pupils in understanding these situations and in weaving the significance involved in them into their own life development.

The class recitation, however, has a very specific

constructive task. There must needs be a medium through which to work in securing an all-round development of pupils in school. To round out the many sides of many sorts of pupils there must constantly be presented an ever increasing number of facts. It becomes the function of the recitation to present always some new bit of information or knowledge.

Every recitation should present clearly defined and well-formulated new facts to every pupil in the class. That fact may be very small, it may appear very unimportant as it relates to some great truth or principle, but however small, however lacking in importance it may seem, every recitation must eventuate in adding to the store of factual knowledge which every pupil is gathering and storing.

Perforce, these facts will be most varied in nature. There will be the necessity of fixing these facts in a great variety of ways. All will call for emphasis, drill, fixation. The recitation is not complete and satisfactory when the mere statement of a fact has been made: that fact must be fixed and associated with other facts; it must find itself woven into the experience of the individual pupils.

It is this function of the recitation which too often receives the major part of attention by teachers. It results in the "hearing of classes," in the "testing type" of recitation. The class in spelling, for instance, is only "heard," or is asked to take spelling blanks and write words from dictation. A lesson in algebra becomes merely an attempt to determine whether or not pupils have done a certain set task. In like manner for the other recitations the teachers feel their duty is done when they have placed a fact in the minds of their pupils. This imparting of some bit of knowledge is an extremely vital and necessary function of the recitation but it is *only* one.

Facts in the recitation, in the educative process, are more largely means to an end than we are accustomed to think. The fact that six times five is thirty is not highly important in itself, but when one wishes to borrow \$500 at 6 per cent interest the fact that six times five is thirty becomes highly important as a matter of good or bad business. Little importance is attached to the single bit of knowledge that there is such a thing as the Gulf Stream. It becomes important only when we use the fact to help explain certain peculiar climatic conditions. So it is in the recitation. The facts of history, the bit of geographical knowledge, the law of science, the rule of grammar, is but a means to an end. They are but tools for the doing of a much larger piece of work. One function of the recitation is, undoubtedly, to impart to the class some important fact, some bit of knowledge, some truth

about the world in which we live. It is nevertheless, a further function of the recitation to be forward looking. It is not right that every recitation should end within itself. In every piece of class work there should be an element of prophecy, an attitude of more yet to be known, an atmosphere of other times, other people, and other places.

This laying of foundations for continued study involves interest, motive, emulation, emphasis, value, suggestion. It is not enough that a class get the material of today's lesson only; they must also get an inspiration, a desire to go on with tomorrow's lesson and with the other lessons that are to follow.

It is this phase of the recitation which the Herbartians designated as the step of Preparation. It is partly what Dr. McMurry means when he talks about Motivation. Call it by any name under the sun, the principle is clear—a conscious looking forward, clearing away of debris and obstruction, offering of an inducement to advance, creating of a desire to see what is just ahead beyond the bend in the road.

To illustrate the meaning. In teaching the facts about the Renaissance in England the class should have the suggestion put before them of the possible effect upon religion and the relation between state and religion which would result when great masses of people began to read, study and think for themselves. To the class studying or reciting about the facts concerning equiangular triangles a suggestion might be made as to what the possible relation would be between equilateral triangles. The sequential relation between rainfall, rivers, silt, detritus, deltas, dredging, harbors, terminals for railroads and for ships, freight centers, etc., etc., will of course suggest themselves at once. Further illustration is not needed. It is one more function of the recitation that it be forward looking and relate past, present and future knowledge as closely as possible.

Finally, it is a function of the recitation to provide an opportunity for the students to give expression to their ideals. It is a function of the recitation to resolve thinking and feeling into action. The recitation which fails to secure self-activity on the part of children is itself a partial failure. Learning by doing is as necessary as the learning by seeing or by hearing.

This viewpoint has been much distorted by the popular clamor of "learn to do by doing." While it is highly important to learn to act through action it is equally important to remember that the action should be the result of deliberate thought, deliberate planning, deliberate consideration of the deed to be done.

The emphasis is here to be noted. Every recitation should *result* in some sort of activity on the part of

the pupils. After the facts have been presented, while the teacher is attempting to develop the entire life of the pupils, as a foundation for continued interest in the topic, the pupils must be led to act,—if possible, to act as the spontaneous result of the recitation,—but at all odds to act.

After, or as a part of the formal spelling lessons, there ought to be individual use of the words in original sentences. The history lesson or the English lesson may result in dramatization and acting the scenes studied or read. Caesar's bridge may be built, the map of Gaul may be drawn from description, the battle lines indicated and arrayed, etc. To the resourceful and eager teacher countless opportunities for self-activity present themselves in every recitation.

In summary then,—it is the function of the recitation to develop the entire life of the pupils; to impart some definite piece of knowledge; to bind together the old, the new and the unknown but glimpsed material; and finally to secure from every pupil some sort of response growing out of the recitation.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD RECITATION

How may the class recitation be characterized? What specific features may be looked for in a good recitation? How may a teacher judge as to the efficiency of his or her own work? How may those preparing to teach derive clear ideals upon which to build their own thoughts as to the teaching process?

In the absence of definite and concrete standards of measurement, a more or less arbitrary standard or set of standards may be presented. Possibly it is not wise to consider these matters as a means of standardizing classroom work but rather as hypotheses upon which to work out a theory of good practice in teaching.

First and fundamental to such a consideration is the necessity for well-planned lessons. This involves several different factors, the primary one of which is probably the factor of aim or purpose in the conduct of class exercises. The matter may be stated rather dogmatically as follows: Every recitation must have a clearly defined aim or purpose and be planned with that in view.

Of course such an aim may be remote as, for example, to aid in the complete development of the individuals in the class. It may be (and it is with this we are most concerned) immediate. To illustrate: a recitation may aim to develop the number sense for ten; it may aim to present the idea of common earth forms, as mountain, plain, island, promontory, cape, etc. The purpose of a recitation may be to fix certain language forms, or to establish correct reactions to the presenta-

tion of certain number combinations. Such recitations would have immediate aims contributory to the larger and more remote purpose.

For the accomplishment of this specific and immediate aim the necessary prerequisite is careful and well-thought out lesson planning. With the aims and purpose of a class exercise clearly in mind, the teacher must lay out the lines along which the recitation is to proceed.

Here again is seen the necessity for careful discrimination and for thoughtful work on the part of teachers. This plan must be extensive and forward looking and must be also very limited and very concrete. Perhaps one might better say there are two types of class exercises calling for two clearly defined types of planning; one broad and looking far ahead, the other narrow and confined to an immediate situation.

Illustration will probably make the point clearer. When the teacher is ready to have a class read "Treasure Island" it will be necessary to plan ahead for a considerable number of recitations and to know into what several parts the story may be wisely divided and to know which parts are to be emphasized and which parts are to be run over lightly. The teacher must have clearly in mind the end and aim in teaching the class to read the story and be ready to bring the class along to a realization of the purpose she has in mind. Further than this, as the teacher begins the reading in the class work and as the lessons go on day after day each and every part of the "Treasure Island" adventure must stand out as a unit to be finally welded into a complete whole. The units will be of different sizes in the different schools and in the different classes, one teacher having an unreasonably short time to devote to the recitation and another having twice or three times as long. That is no reason why every unit, large or small, should not be complete and well-rounded out. In fact there is every reason in the world why the teacher who is compelled to teach short periods and in small units should plan those units with the utmost care and thought. As a time-saver, as a means of doing concentrated and intensive work nothing is so effectual as having one's work carefully planned and systematized.

In the high school recitation there is perhaps more need than anywhere else for careful planning of lessons since here the pupils are fixing their life habits of thinking and need to be taught how to select, arrange, classify, summarize and apply their store of facts. Far too few high school teachers lay out and classify the material they are to present to their classes. To many such, a recitation is but a set time for covering so much ground, and there is little thought of se-

quence, either logical or psychological, in the presentation of lessons.

The teacher of Cicero needs to know the large units into which the Orations may be wisely divided, to know the smaller and still smaller wholes which may be taught as units. The teacher must plan which parts of a given passage will be used to illustrate certain grammatical principles or certain forms of sentence structure. The study of the Orations needs to be planned as a whole, then each Oration as a whole, each part or natural division determined upon and the length or kind of lesson clearly planned for any given recitation. To assign arbitrarily a given number of lines daily, or to ask questions concerning sentence structure or work forms on the spur of the moment in the midst of the recitation, is not good teaching. The remedy for it is to lay out the work wisely and with care, exactly as a mechanic or a business man would do.

For the teacher with a very limited experience this detailed planning of every lesson is a necessity; and yet it is this very class of teachers who are most unwilling to take such pains in preparing to do good work. After a considerable period of such laying out of work, and after entire familiarity with the subject matter has given a sense of values, there is need for less of this detailed and elaborate planning. However, the lesson plans for the larger topics and their adaptations to the differentiations present in different classes must needs be worked out anew at least every year.

In planning the recitation and in laying out the class work for the consideration of extended topics like the subjunctive mood, the Appalachian Highlands, factoring in algebra, the Punic Wars, etc., there are certain guiding principles which need consideration.

The teacher must clearly understand and have clearly in mind an actuating motive for presenting the topic. A clearly defined motive is the bed-rock for constructing a successful recitation. No teacher should attempt the presentation of a lesson or of the larger unit, the topic, without a grasp of the motive or motives which may be utilized in securing the interest and attention of the members in the class.

This factor is discovered by the teacher asking such questions of herself or himself as,—“What is the vital point in this lesson or topic?” “How is it related to the life of the pupils, of the community, of the world-at-large?” “Why should this lesson (topic) be presented?” “What relation does this lesson or this topic bear to the past work, to the work that follows?” “How does this lesson relate to the topic as a whole?”

#### INTEREST AND WORTHY MOTIVE IN THE RECITATION

Such questions at once imply that the motive should grow out of the lesson itself, out of the subject under

consideration and not be the result of a derived, or an external interest. The easier, and far too common method of arousing interest and of stimulating attention is through utilizing marks, class standing, fear of punishment or of non-promotion. Such motives are unworthy of the really efficient, the really professional teacher. To secure attention and to maintain interest through fear of punishment or through hope of reward is to admit that one is even yet in the first stages of development. It is like making people do right through fear of eternal punishment or hope of eternal bliss rather than because to do the right is the normal thing to do. The first ways are the early stages, necessary, perhaps, in some cases but of a much poorer and of a much lower order of effort than the last. The poor teacher drives or cajoles. The good teacher leads. One employs compulsion, the other secures co-operation.

Evidently to do this requires thought, care, a wide knowledge of subject matter, a clear understanding of the individual differences existing in the class, and a determination to make the most of every class exercise. Such work is tedious and requires painstaking care; it may become monotonous and a bore. To be sure, and so may any other occupation or vocation become brain-fagging and soul-wearying to one who will not see beyond the day's task and the immediate labor involved. To the true teacher such work is only a necessary means to a successful end.

[Dr. Williams's article will be concluded in our March number. In the second part of it he discusses in a most interesting and helpful manner such matters as “Planning the Recitation: A Question of Relative Values,” “The Art of Good Questioning,” “The Process of Generalization and Application,” etc.—N. W. W.]

#### N. E. A. AT CHICAGO

THE most important educational gathering of this year will be the meeting of the Department of Superintendence of the N. E. A. in Chicago, Ill., from February 24 to March 1.

The problems now confronting the educational leaders in our country are nation-wide in scope and consequently of vital importance. The speakers on the program will be men and women actually engaged in the work of teaching and supervising. The topics to be discussed will be such as reach directly home to the teacher on the firing-line.

The hotel accommodations are ample and the transportation facilities are excellent. Not to attend this meeting this year will be a lost privilege of getting clear down to bed-rock thinking about our big task. Let's all go!—L. A. W.